

# **Eau Claire Comprehensive Plan 2015**

## **Urban Design Assessment**



City of Eau Claire Wisconsin

## Urban Design Assessment

Major Urban Design Issues .....	9-1
Accomplishments since the 2005 <i>Comprehensive Plan</i> .....	9-3
Factors Affecting Urban Form and Visual Character .....	9-4
Natural Features and Historic Development Pattern.....	9-4
Early Planning and Development .....	9-4
Contemporary Influences .....	9-5
Community Image .....	9-6
Geography and Natural Features .....	9-6
Urban Form .....	9-7
Civic Identity .....	9-8
Urban Design Themes .....	9-9
Analysis of Visual Character Elements .....	9-10
New Residential Areas .....	9-10
Established Neighborhoods .....	9-11
Major Road Corridors .....	9-12
Commercial Districts .....	9-17
Downtown .....	9-19
Riverfronts .....	9-21
Public and Institutional Buildings .....	9-23
Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances and Design Guidelines .....	9-25

## Urban Design Assessment

This chapter examines past and current conditions in Eau Claire’s built environment, discusses forces affecting the appearance of the city and identifies the major urban design issues facing the community.

### Major Issues in Community Urban Design

These are the major community urban design issues identified through the analysis of conditions. Issues are questions to be discussed, debated and resolved during the planning process in light of the other issues noted in the *Comprehensive Plan*.

#### New Residential Neighborhoods

1. **Street Connectivity:** Should streets in new neighborhoods be interconnected or should the pattern be dominated by cul-de-sacs?
2. **Street Design:** Should future minor residential streets be built narrower than they are presently, which is 30 feet between the backs of the curbs?
3. **Sidewalks:** Should future residential streets have sidewalks on both sides?
4. **Development Model:** Which development model is preferred: the traditional neighborhood with its emphasis on the street, sidewalk and front yard, or the more low density “suburban” look? Does Eau Claire wish to design its zoning regulations to promote one or the other, or leave it to the market to decide?
5. **Small Commercial Nodes:** In what locations, if any, would the older urban model of neighborhood corner store be allowed and encouraged?
6. **Guidelines for Site Planning:** Should the *Multi-Family Housing Design Manual* (1998) be strengthened and made mandatory by incorporating those guidelines as requirements in the zoning ordinance?

#### Established Residential Neighborhoods

1. **Context-Sensitive Architecture:** Should new infill and redevelopment of existing structures (both single-family and multi-family) follow established site design patterns and be stylistically compatible with the predominant neighborhood aesthetic?
2. **Commercial Activity in Predominately Residential Areas:** Under what conditions, if any, should commercial development be allowed in areas that are predominately residential?

3. **Mixture of Housing Types:** In what instances, if any, would it be appropriate to introduce multiple-family housing into single-family neighborhoods? What conditions should be applied in such instances?
4. **Mixed-Use Development:** Where might it be appropriate to mix residential with non-residential land uses? When might they be mixed vertically (housing above business) or horizontally (housing next to commercial space)?
5. **New Cultural Influences:** What should be the City's urban design response, if any, to new cultural influences resulting from its changing population?
6. **Neighborhood Identification:** Should neighborhoods and districts be identified by signs and banners?

### Commercial Districts and Corridors

1. **Design Guidelines and Design Review:** Should the site planning and landscaping regulations in the zoning ordinance be made more rigorous?
2. **Design Guidelines for Commercial Signs:** Should business signs be more limited in size, height and number?
3. **Commercial Lighting and Signage:** Should the City more tightly control the lighting and designs at commercial developments?
4. **Oakwood Mall and Vicinity:** Should the City promote more intensive development around the shopping mall that may eventually include multi-story office buildings, multiple-family housing, mixed-use development and structured parking?
5. **Major Road Corridor Beautification:** Should the City undertake landscaping and decorative lighting improvement projects along the major roadways of the city such as US 312 (North Crossing), Hendrickson Drive and North Clairemont Avenue?
6. **Billboards:** Should the City continue to limit billboards?

### Parks and Riverfronts

1. **Mount Tom:** Should communication towers be allowed in parks.
2. **Public Open Space:** Should the City seek to create additional public open space in the older neighborhoods as redevelopment occurs?
3. **Park Design:** Should new neighborhood parks have primarily an aesthetic focus or a utilitarian focus (such as gardens and gazebos versus athletic fields and parking lots)?

### Downtown

1. **Town Square:** Should a "town square" be created next to City Hall and along Eau Claire Street?

### New Industrial and Business Park Development

1. **Density of Development:** Should the City encourage higher densities in its industrial and business parks?

## **Accomplishments since the 2005 *Comprehensive Plan***

Since the prior *Comprehensive Plan* was adopted in 2005, these accomplishments or changes have occurred regarding urban design in Eau Claire:

### **North Barstow District**

Redevelopment has continued using the model of multi-story buildings located close to the public sidewalk with parking under the building and/or to the rear; some of the residential buildings include commercial space on the first floor.

JAMF Software has constructed a major office building along Phoenix Park next to the RCU headquarters building. JAMF and RCU will partner with the City to build a parking structure in the middle of the district.

The decision has been made to soon redevelop the building occupied by the US Post Office.

### **South Barstow District**

Barstow Street and Graham Avenue have been rebuilt into two-way streets from their former one-way configuration; that should make it easier for pedestrians to cross those streets. The design included corner bump-outs and street trees.

A commitment has been made to create a major mixed-use development and public plaza at the river confluence opposite the RCU building.

### **West Riverside Neighborhood**

Mayo Clinic Health System added a major wing to its hospital with an orientation toward Half Moon Lake.

### **Clairemont Educational and Medical District**

The University adopted an ambitious campus master plan that includes residential and academic buildings.

### **Riverfronts**

It was announced that a heavy industrial site along the Chippewa River (County Materials) will be redeveloped into an event and recreation center. This will be a better use of that high-amenity site.

Twenty-one acres of heavily wooded, steeply-sloped land was acquired for public open space along the north bank of the Eau Claire River upstream of River Prairie Drive.

### **Hastings Way**

Hastings Way was rebuilt to four lanes from six and fitted with landscaping, lighting, sidewalks and a bike path. US Highway 53 was rerouted, making Hastings Way more of a local road. Land use changes are underway.

### **Water Street District**

Redevelopment has reinforced the walkable, urban nature of Water Street.

### **Narrower Streets with Sidewalks**

The City has reduced its standards for 36-foot wide local streets to 28 to 32 feet widths, depending on parking needs and neighborhood location. Sidewalks remain required on both sides of the street unless deferred by City Council or topographical reasons.

### **Multi-family Design Manual**

This manual was updated by the Plan Commission in 2006 with requirements for front facing doors and windows, among other changes.

### **Signs**

The City's Sign Code has had numerous changes over the past ten years, many pertaining to changes in electronic message centers standards.

### **Lighting**

The City did adopt a set of standards for exterior lighting that limit the amount of lighting to State Energy Code standards and requires shielded or "dark sky compliant" fixtures.

## **Factors Affecting Urban Form and Visual Character**

### **Natural Features and Historic Development Pattern**

Streams, hills, floodplains and woods often influence where a city is located and how it grows, and this certainly was the case in Eau Claire with the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers.

The first European-built houses in the area were constructed by French-Canadians who came to trade for furs with the Sioux and Chippewa Indians. Their rough log cabins were fashioned from magnificent white pines that covered the Chippewa Valley northward for over one hundred miles.

But by 1850, settlers arrived from the East to seek their fortune from the seemingly endless forests. This river junction, with its transportation routes, natural log storage areas and water power for sawmills, provided an ideal place for these Yankee entrepreneurs to establish a new lumbering center.

Several sawmills were in operation by 1855. By 1857, one tiny village had developed on the west bank of the Chippewa River, while two others grew up on the north and south sides of the Eau Claire River. By 1860, their combined population had grown from a handful of people to over 2,000. The face of the community was changing, and so was its housing. Family homes, rooming houses, stores, hotels and bars sprang up, all built with the narrow boards produced in the local mills.

The settlements boomed in spite of frequent fires and floods. The first reliable bridges were built over the Eau Claire River in 1859 and the Chippewa River in 1869, and the first locomotive arrived in 1870. In 1872, the three original villages were incorporated as the City of Eau Claire.

### **Early Planning and Development**

Many cities in the United States experienced their first period of major growth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, as did Eau Claire. Civic pride of place was strong, and cities were often laid out in detailed plan, with parks and parkways, civic buildings, bridges and grand boulevards lined with trees. Building materials were often drawn from what could be found in the region, and structures were designed according to a set of commonly held principles of proportion, form and ornamentation.

The result was usually varied enough to be interesting, but the underlying continuity of principles created harmony. And, as the automobile had not yet begun to dictate form, the pedestrian-scaled city could be experienced and appreciated by all during the course of everyday business.

## **Contemporary Influences**

After World War II, a booming economy and new technologies contributed to both the rise of the family car as the primary mode of transportation, and the spread of new housing into the countryside. The natural controls that had kept built form within the familiar parameters disappeared, and enthusiasm for the streamlined forms and new technologies of the “Automobile Age” took off with the demand for new housing, business centers and infrastructure.

The results have been mixed, for the benefits of the freedom of the highway and the privacy and open space of the suburbs have had consequences that touch almost all aspects of life, many of which are a direct result of the way cities are planned and built.

The physical design of the city – in both its private and public improvements – should evolve with these changes in industry and population. In an effort to understand the forces affecting contemporary built form, it is useful to study the major influences of the last 50 years.

### **The Automobile and New Technologies**

Participation in the life of most contemporary cities or suburbs strongly encourages the use of a car. Large amounts of land are devoted to roadways, interchanges and parking.

The rise of Internet business and shopping may eventually result in some reduced need for daily automobile trips. A related effect may be a resurgence of interest in the public realm, where a need for human contact and change of scene brings house-bound workers to their local coffee shop or neighborhood park. The demand for compact, aesthetically pleasing retail venues, safe public spaces, and a human-scaled environment may will only increase.

### **Changing Market Trends**

The trends of the last sixty years have seen an increase in the amount of land devoted to cities and automobile-associated retail business and entertainment, as well as a recent resurgence of interest in urban living. While large-lot development is still pushing into undeveloped areas, a more compact, less auto-dependent lifestyle is becoming more desirable for many across a broad range of households.

A long view of population trends sees the Millenials as well as the Baby Boomers seeking a high-quality-of-life environment. The rise of single-parent households necessitates smaller, more convenient housing, close to public transportation systems, while concern over the confining effects of contemporary suburban life on children and teenagers may cause many families to seek a more “traditional” neighborhood way of life. Rising fuel costs and the uncertainties of the economy may also contribute to a slowing of demand for the extra-large suburban housing and truck-sized automobiles. Increased public discussion and education about the issues of sustainable living may also have an effect on market trends.

### **Pedestrian Nodes in a Varied Urban Environment**

Regardless of which forms dominate the market in coming decades, all indicators suggest that a healthy, successful community will offer a range of housing choices and transportation alternatives within a varied, human-scaled public realm. This suggests a need to build Eau Claire differently than the conventional approach to restore balance by countering the strong influence of the automobile.



## **Community Image**

Defining the intrinsic image or identity of a city is a step toward drafting meaningful design ideas. Local identity may be composed of geography and natural features, urban form and non-visual aspects of civic identity.

## **Geography and Natural Features**

### **Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers**

Eau Claire's location at the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers is its most dominant feature. As the two rivers wind through the city, they are visible from many neighborhoods and locations. Several bridges pass over them, and other roads and bicycle paths run along side them. North and south of the downtown, tall, wooded bluffs rise from the banks of the Chippewa River, providing magnificent views and framing vistas up and down the river. Half Moon Lake is an oxbow of the Chippewa River and also an integral part of Eau Claire.

### **Hills**

Several lines of hills surround the city and define the stream valleys. They provide views, separate neighborhoods and districts, and provide visual interest. Roads wind around them or slice down their slopes. Certain prominent points, such as Mts. Simon, Tom and Washington, are landmarks and visual references.

### **Wooded Slopes**

Related to the hills are the wooded slopes and the bluffs, especially along the Chippewa River. The dense woods give the city a sense of place among the rolling farmlands. Approaching Eau Claire from the west along I-94, a driver descends into the Chippewa River valley through scattered groves then passes through dense forests on both sides of the highway. At that point, the city is hardly noticeable, and a very green image of the community is presented. In the northeastern quadrant, near the Town of Seymour and around Altoona Lake, the pines and oaks are thick on the steep hillsides, providing attractive housing sites. Trees also fill the several creek valleys.

### **Farmlands**

Finally, emerging from the river valleys, there are high, rolling farmlands all around Eau Claire with dairy farms, cultivated fields and numerous semi-rural houses.

## Urban Form

### Street Grid

In addition to its major natural features, the image of Eau Claire is defined by its street grid. The original town layout had street running parallel to the Chippewa River, such as in the downtown and the Owen Park neighborhood. Later, a north-south pattern was begun, and the points where the two grids meet create interesting viewpoints.

Outside the central core (bounded roughly by Carson Park, Dells Pond and Putnam Park) the street pattern is mostly an interconnected and modified grid with few cul-de-sac streets. Some people very much like cul-de-sacs for their low traffic volumes and sense of privacy. However, they break up the community, force more traffic onto major streets, make walking and bicycling difficult and cause problems for buses, emergency vehicles and snow plows.

### Land Use Patterns

Housing density decreases from the central neighborhoods outward. Likewise, there is greater separation between housing and businesses in the perimeter locations. Both of these features are a direct result of the introduction of the automobile. Many people enjoy the greater diversity and tighter urban fabric of the older neighborhoods, and these are what many people point to as symbolic of Eau Claire, but others prefer the more private patterns of the newer areas.

Businesses line the major roadways such as Clairemont Street or Hastings Way. For the most part, these businesses use a suburban strip-mall or medium-to-big box form with large, brightly lit open parking lots and pylon signs facing the roadways. These forms give way to older, smaller, single-story commercial, institutional and multi-family residential land uses as one proceeds toward the city center.

### Downtown

The downtown is reinventing its historic role as the civic, visual and psychological center of the community even if its economic role has diminished. Downtown still has a large stock of attractive multi-story brick buildings although it is pock-marked with open parking lots and architectural alterations. Unfortunately, the downtown mostly turns its back on both rivers and fails to take advantage of them as amenities and economic advantages.

But major changes in riverfront land use have occurred in recent years with the addition of Phoenix Park, the RCU headquarters, JAMF software, the North Barstow District residential and mixed-use buildings, the planned mixed-use, private and public complex on the southern bank of the confluence, and First Avenue Park.

### Oakwood Mall and Vicinity

The largest collection of retail and service businesses in the city is what many people from the hinterland imagine about Eau Claire. It is also a frequent destination for many local residents because of its size, diversity and quality.

It is not inconceivable that the vicinity of Golf Road and Oakwood Hills Parkway will continue to grow in density, intensity and variety with mixed-use development, multiple-family housing, a more urban feel and structured parking.

## **Civic Identity**

### **Riverfronts**

Eau Claire is fortunate in that the features that have contributed to its success as an industrial and commercial center – the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers – are also impressive physical and recreational assets. Although their beauty has long been recognized, its only in the last twenty years or so that their full value has been reflected in public policy and public interest.

In Eau Claire as in some many other American cities, the demands of industry have historically taken precedence over scenic beauty, but residents today have a greater appreciation for the recreational benefits of their environment. High on the list of livability factors are clean air, clean water, a visually pleasing public realm, and easy access to recreation and parks. Eau Claire, as a vital regional center, can afford to make the most of its natural features, not only as an enriching amenity for its residents, but also as the base for a strong recreation and hospitality-based industry. Indeed, the community cannot afford to ignore its natural features as a means of enriching quality of life.

### **Computing Center**

Another major feature of the Eau Claire identity is its intellectual and applied science base. Eau Claire is home to a campus of the University of Wisconsin, which has a campus overlooking the Chippewa River. Eau Claire and its neighbor, Chippewa Falls, have several computer-related firms such as Cray Research and Hutchinson Technology, perhaps making it the “Silicon Valley of Wisconsin.”

### **Medical Center**

Even more important than the computing industry is the large and growing medical establishment. People now travel long distances for treatment at one of the two fine hospitals or several specialty clinics in Eau Claire.

### **Retail Center**

As with the medical industry, the Eau Claire retail market area extends far from the city. Oakwood Mall is a major retail force and one of the few enclosed malls in the state. The city has more grocery stores than normally found in a community of this size. Moreover, the mall location has attracted many national retail stores and restaurants that are not found in smaller towns. These and other businesses cater to a population with disposal income and demanding tastes.

## **Urban Design Themes**

The preceding and subsequent material in this chapter could be synthesized into these dominant visual or design themes. These thematic ideas could be the basis for public and private design and public art in Eau Claire.

### ***Confluence of the Rivers***

The confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers gave rise to this community and remains its visual and psychological center.

### ***Traditional Neighborhoods***

The older neighborhoods, with their front porches, tree-lined streets and nearby commercial nodes, are the most beloved images of life in Eau Claire even if they are not longer the most typical neighborhood style.

### ***Wooded Hillsides***

Eau Claire is an island of shaded relief in the midst of the larger rolling prairie. The community is embraced by the hills, and they form a green backdrop for some of the neighborhoods.

## Analysis of Visual Character Elements

### New Residential Areas

The visual appearance of newer residential neighborhoods (built since 1945) tended to be dominated by one type of housing versus another. That is, a district is usually composed entirely of detached housing or entirely of attached housing, and usually the same type of attached housing. This provides a comforting degree of consistency. But in the case of attached housing, it often means an excess of one type of housing or even a concentration of attached housing in one location.

Other neighborhoods of Eau Claire are attractive in their own ways, but the emphasis moved from walkability to automobile access. This led to greater dominance of the garage door, a gradual shifting of the private outdoor space to the back of the house, wider streets and bigger lots. Some of the newer neighborhoods have trees in the street right-of-way (sometimes between the sidewalk and the curb) while other only have private landscaping. Sidewalks are usually located along one side of each minor (local) street.



The front porch on this house and its position flush with the garage reduces the visual impact of the wide garage door. Windows in the garage door and a color that matches the house would have also helped.



This newer house has a prominent front entry and a garage door that is flush with the façade. Setting the garage back just a few feet would have helped even more. Often, the decision about garage placement is guided by the price point of the house and lot.



This residential street benefits from street trees and a sidewalk on both sides. Even though this street is as wide as the one to the right, the trees have lessened that visual effect.



This local street was built wider than necessary at 36 feet and lacks a sidewalk and street trees. Under current standards it would have been built at 30 feet with sidewalks and trees on both sides.



Apartment buildings and townhouses in the newer neighborhoods came to be designed with less sensitivity to the public space of the street and had less resemblance to single-family houses. Sidewalks in areas of attached housing were often built on only one side of the street if at all. These housing forms are not as compatible in the newer neighborhoods as they were in the old and, consequently, they have been relegated to enclaves by themselves and separated from single-family housing.



Some contemporary apartments or townhouses have prominent garages at the expense of the front door.

## Established Neighborhoods

### Oldest Neighborhoods

The oldest neighborhoods of Eau Claire, especially those on the near-west and near-south sides of the downtown, have an attractive pattern of narrow streets, sidewalks, street trees and porches. There are beautiful historic houses and districts, traditional park features and nearby, small commercial nodes. These districts were designed for walking, and they glorify the sidewalk, porch and front yard. They serve as a reminder of the way the city once was, and also provides inspiration for the way it can be.



Houses built before approximately 1950 had a prominent and welcoming front door, sometimes with a raised porch for sitting and greeting passers-by, a set-back garage, sometimes located in the rear yard, and a narrow street with sidewalks and trees. The neighborhoods were distinctly designed for walking.

## Major Road Corridors

Major roads have a dramatic effect on the image of a city because a person may view many miles of them daily and because they are composed of both public space and private space. The major road corridors in Eau Claire include:

- Hastings Way
- Clairemont Avenue
- Hendrickson Drive
- Old Wells Road
- Cameron Street
- Birch Street
- State Street
- Golf Road
- Wisconsin Highway 312 (The North Crossing)

In general, these and other major road corridors in Eau Claire could use improvements such as:

- **Land Use:** Less reliance on a strip of commercial development one lot deep in favor of introducing some housing sites and creating commercial or industrial areas that orient toward a secondary street rather than the major road.
- **Site Improvements:** The location of the building, its entrance and windows, parking lots, loading areas and trash handling could be arranged on the site to create a more view from the major road.
- **Landscaping:** In conjunction with site planning, trees, shrubs and berms could be used to soften the appearance of the parking lot and generally improve the image of the property, especially for businesses or industry.
- **Signs:** As with most cities, signs tend to be too numerous, large and complicated.
- **Access Management:** The number and location of street intersections and private driveways often needs greater control and coordination to protect the traffic capacity of the road.

## Hastings Way

Hastings Way, Clairemont Avenue and Hendrickson Drive are primarily commercial in nature. Because of the zoning regulations in place during their time of development, they lack private landscaping, have excessive amounts of business signage and are overlit. Parking is almost always in front of the building and has insufficient berming or plantings to soften the view. However, the positive effect of the zoning amendments adopted since the 1993 *Comprehensive Plan* can be seen in the newer business sites.

This previous route for US 53 is a classic example of a federal highway gone bad. Originally intended as a fringe by-pass of Eau Claire and part of a much longer state artery, lack of access control led to its function being greatly diminished. With numerous driveways, left-turns lanes and street intersections, US 53 could no longer accommodate the demand to carry traffic across or past Eau Claire while serving as a local access street for businesses. A new alignment was needed, at great cost, to assume the traffic function.

Fortunately, in 2010 Hastings Way was turned over to the City from the State, rebuilt to four lanes from six and nicely landscaped. Sidewalks and a bike path were added, driveway

access points were relocated or consolidated, and a pedestrian tunnel was built under the road at Fenwick Avenue.

Most of the heavy truck and regional pass-through traffic was rerouted to the new US 53, allowing Hastings Way to resume its original role as a local commercial access corridor and minor arterial road.

Property reinvestment began soon after the road was recreated. The challenge for property owners will be to improve the appearance of the commercial sites with better architecture, site planning, landscaping and signage.



The Hastings Way corridor has been given a new lease on life thanks to the redesign and reconstruction of the road.

### Clairemont Avenue

Although the access control along Clairemont Avenue on the western side of Eau Claire is very good, thanks to the use of frontage roads, the paved area is consequently enormous. As a highway it functions well, but it divides the community and lacks visual appeal.

In its east-west alignment through south-central Eau Claire, the Clairemont Avenue design changes to a more urban cross-section with curbing and no frontage roads. Access is limited to major intersections. A recent reconstruction project between Hendrickson Drive and Hastings Way added some much-needed trees and improved the bicycling path.

Its intersection with Hendrickson Drive should be improved as a major arrival point and entrance to two of the community's greatest institutions – Sacred Heart Hospital and the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. The passage near the university lacks the beauty and importance that it deserves. The pedestrian overpass adds a sense of gateway, and the section past Putnam Park and the neighborhoods is attractive.

The forecourt of Sacred Heart Hospital has been beautifully landscaped but commercial area on the southern side of Clairemont Avenue lacks landscaping.



Clairemont Avenue looking east from the pedestrian overpass near University Drive.



## Hendrickson Drive

Hendrickson Drive is another important perimeter access corridor. To the west is the magnificent Chippewa River valley; to the south it the I-94 corridor with its wooded hills; and on the north is a robust medical and educational complex.

However, in between are treeless parking lots, numerous billboards and franchise architecture. As an introduction to the community, it is sorely lacking. The highway is merely a functional traffic artery.



The Hendrickson Drive corridor has great unrealized potential as a magnificent entry to the community from I-94.

## The North Crossing, Highway 312

The North Crossing is a major entrance into the Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls community from the direction of the Twin Cities. It runs all the way east-west across the urban area and offers views up and down the Chippewa River. But because it is designed to carry large numbers of cars and trucks at high speeds, it forms a barrier rather than a seam.

Additionally, the road edges have little or no landscaping, so the visual effect does not convey the beauty of the rest of the city. Fortunately, some stretches of the corridor are lined with impressive forest, hills, escarpments, rock cuts and river views.

Auto-oriented commercial development near the interchange with I-94 (in Town of Union) lacks landscaping while being over-lit and over-signed.



The North Crossing corridor is a major regional entrance and offers a variety of urban and natural imagery.

### **Old Wells Road**

Old Wells is a lower functional classification of road than others such as Hastings Way or Clairemont Avenue, and has been designed with just two through lanes and closely-spaced local street intersections.

Trees soften the edges, and drivers can steal glimpses of the Chippewa River through the foliage. Traffic speeds are calmed by the road's curves and hills.

Altogether, Old Wells is a very attractive alternative to the other arterials of the City.



Old Wells Road near Domer Park and the Chippewa River

It complements are the other spokes of the wheel emanating from downtown -- the newly-redesigned Birch Street, Harding Avenue, State Street, Cameron Street and Galloway Street.

Old Wells transitions south into the attractively redesigned Third Street, which leads to Oxford and Madison Streets in the West Riverside Neighborhood.

### **Galloway Street**

Galloway Street is a visually interesting path between downtown and Hastings Way. Along its north side are historic homes and the massive Banbury Place while along the south side are the Eau Claire River and wooded open space.

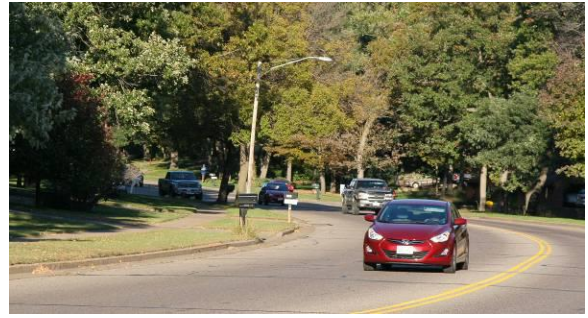
Galloway Street has potential to relieve some of the traffic burden from Birch Street if it had a bridge over the Union Pacific Railroad track.



The Galloway Street corridor is visually interesting as a result of nearby historic homes, Banbury Place and the Eau Claire River Valley.

### **Golf Road**

Golf Road winds through hills and woods between Highway 93 and Highway 53. It links shops, small offices, the regional mall and newer residential neighborhoods. It fits into the landscape nicely and does duty as both a major commercial artery and residential approach.



Golf Road as it winds up a wooded hill

### **Cameron and Birch Streets**

Cameron and Birch Street carry high volumes of traffic to and from Downtown and across the city. They are lined with a combination of housing and businesses, and present a mixed image. Path-finding along those routes to Downtown could be improved.



Cameron (I) and Birch Streets have each benefited from improved edge treatments.

### **State Street**

State Street is one of the more interesting and attractive thoroughfares in Eau Claire. It combines residential and commercial frontages, hills, views to Putnam Park, greenery and historic houses. It carries a significant traffic volume without severely harming the adjacent neighborhoods. The nearby University campus would benefit from a more well-defined entrance.



State Street looking south near Garfield Street and the entrance to the University campus



## **Commercial Districts**

Eau Claire has two basic types of commercial districts: those built before the automobile became prominent and those built to serve the auto.

### **Urban Commercial Districts**

The pre-auto districts include principally Downtown, which is described in a separate section below, and Water Street.. The buildings in these locations are oriented toward the sidewalks and the street while parking is on-street, behind the building or on a separate site. Often, offices or housing units are included on upper stories, and the district includes restaurants, bars, cultural activities and public spaces, all of which intensify land use and increase nighttime activity.

The result is a human-scaled and pleasant environment but one that is not as efficient for serving large numbers of retail customers from a broad geographic market because of the parking and access constraints. The downtown environment also provides many places for social interaction such as meetings or festivals and cultural events such as celebrations or parades. The benefits are a sense of place and importance, a feeling of urbanism and an elevated role for public spaces.

Locations such as the North and South Barstow Districts of Downtown, West Grand Avenue and Water Street are beloved and sustained for those qualities while auto-oriented retail centers come and go with the tides of business. These older districts need improvements to streetscape, building facades, parking, tenant mix and upper-story spaces.

### **Suburban Commercial Districts**

The suburban commercial districts built in the last 60 years usually suffer from lack of edge landscaping, oversized signage, proliferation of billboards, too much lighting glare, lack of pedestrian amenities, visual dominance of parking, poor access design, lack of public space and having but a single type of land use. Consequently, various stages of retail abandonment and re-use can be seen in a progression outward from the center of the city as newer, bigger more accessible “centers” are built.

An important urban design challenge for Eau Claire, as for many cities, is how these utilitarian business sites are rehabilitated, repositioned or entirely redeveloped.



The appearance and functional qualities of commercial development in Eau Claire have improved markedly as a result of the zoning code improvements adopted in the wake of the 1993 *Comprehensive Plan* and administered by City staff and the Planning Commission.

## **Downtown**

Downtown Eau Claire has many wonderful qualities, a few visual problems and many fine, untapped opportunities. Downtown has many attractive traditional commercial and mixed-use buildings but is still punctuated by a number of undistinguished or badly modernized structures and open parking lots. As the focus of the city, it deserves a high degree of attention in terms of design treatment.

## **Riverfront Orientation**

Downtown is defined as four districts that surround the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers – South Barstow, North Barstow, West Riverside District and Courthouse. Despite this abundance of waterfront views, some Downtown buildings turned their backs on the river. Even worse, the riverfront has in the past sometimes been used for parking or open storage. However, recent and proposed buildings are reversing that practice.

## **Downtown Plans**

Recent Downtown plans or developments have noted this situation and recommended that new or remodeled structures have windows, balconies and plazas toward the water. In addition, there should be much more and better quality public open space along the river, including promenades and seating. . The *West Riverside District Plan* (2010) and the *Waterways Plan Update* (2012) included policies and images that appropriately guide that quadrant of Downtown. The mixed-use redevelopment occurring in and planned for the North Barstow District is leading a very positive pattern of change

## **Streetscape and the Public Realm**

Until the past ten years, design in the central business district was not always mindful of the importance of creating attractive public space along the street for pedestrians. Essential features that were sometimes overlooked include windows and window displays, frequent doors, attractive façade materials, canopies, lighting, and well-maintained sidewalks. Surface parking was not usually screened with fences, walls and plantings along the sidewalk. Structured parking sometimes intruded on the pedestrian environment instead of being lined with shops or offices at street level. Fortunately, Phoenix Park has opened the North Barstow District to both rivers and created magnificent views and access. Similar improvements are soon to come to the southern side of the river confluence.

## **Urbanism**

Nighttime activity and a sense of after-hours security in Downtown are improving. There is still insufficient housing to give the area of feel of an urban neighborhood but progress is being made. Buildings with housing or offices above shops have been an ideal addition; row houses with steps and patios along the street would be another product that would enliven downtown. The *Confluence* mixed- and multi-use development along Eau Claire Street will bring student housing, shops, restaurants, performing arts, and a riverfront plaza, which will greatly animate the South Barstow District and complement the redevelopment to the north. A “town square” between the Phillips Library and City Hall will provide another civic focal point.





Downtown Eau Claire and Water Street are experiencing a renaissance, a trend that is expected to continue for decades as people rediscover the benefits of living in an urban location that celebrates place, beauty, walking and community. New and refurbished buildings are once again honoring the street and public spaces. Improved parks and streets are leveraging private investment.

## **Downtown Edge District Relationships**

The commercial and residential districts that compose or abut Downtown would benefit from public and private improvements that improve appearances, link and define them better. There is insufficient sense that Downtown is a unified whole, that it has edges and a center, and that there it is composed of distinct and coherent districts. Features such as street trees, decorative lighting, public art, private landscaping, building orientation and land use intensity all could be used more effectively to accomplish those aims. The West Riverside District, for example, would benefit from those treatments. Owen Park, a very attractive traditional park, forms the western edge of the Downtown and links to the neighborhoods, the medical districts, and the east bank via sidewalks, paths, linear parks and bridges.

## **Downtown Access and Wayfinding**

Access to Downtown from the perimeter highways is unclear. Downtown would benefit from more-attractive wayfinding signs and stronger street trees and lighting along its major access routes: Cameron Street, Birch Street, State Street, Harding Avenue and Old Wells Road.

## **Riverfronts**

As stated several times already in this chapter, the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers are the visual and psychological center of Eau Claire. Although they are lined with several attractive linear parks, the community would benefit by continuing to add public riparian open space and use it to leverage additional housing, offices and restaurants. Overall, the community still lacks sufficient visual and functional access to the rivers, which, if improved, could contribute to neighborhood revitalization.

The *Waterways Plan* (2012) reinforced the principles that development along the rivers ought to provide public access to the banks, wooded edges, buildings rather than parking near the rivers and appropriate materials, doors and windows on the river sides of the buildings. Land uses along the rivers should be those that take advantage of the views such as housing, offices, hospitality businesses or parks.

Furthermore, the *Waterways Plan* called for the acquisition of additional land for public open space, parks and paths along the rivers and between the neighborhoods and the riverfronts. Major land acquisition has occurred along the Eau Claire river upstream of River Prairie Drive since that plan was adopted. Some additional land acquisition and clearance for the purpose of flood protection is warranted.

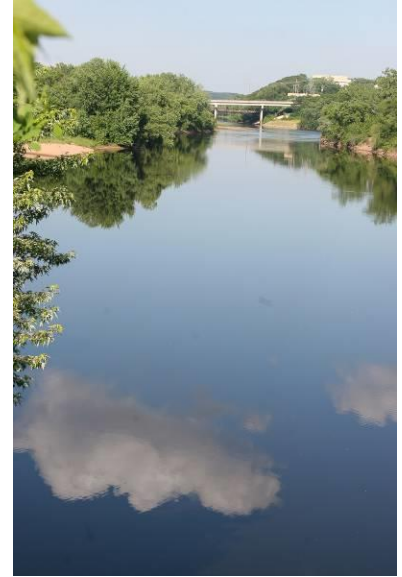
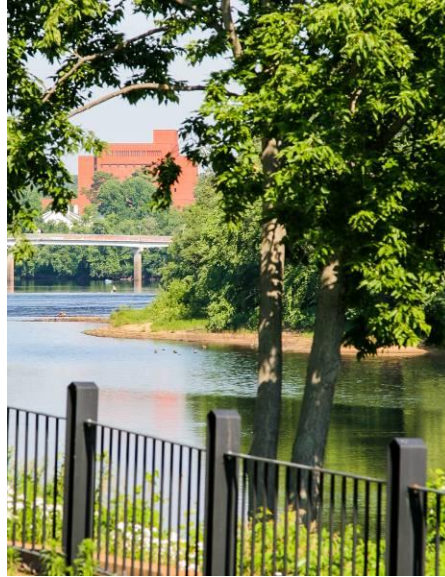
Downstream of the Clairemont Avenue bridge (US 12) there are long-term opportunities (beyond the horizon of this plan) to take advantage of the riverfront by converting industrial and aggregate sites into housing. This idea was also described in the *Waterways Plan*.

## **Natural Resources and Topography**

The riverfronts are composed of a combination of towering bluffs, such as near the University of Wisconsin campus, that provide dramatic views, and low approaches to the river, such as near Downtown, that make the water seem accessible.

The river edge itself would be more attractive if natural means were used to stabilize the banks, such as those illustrated in the *Waterways Plan*.





The Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers, along with Half Moon Lake, give form to the City and present bountiful opportunities for new housing, offices, restaurants and parks.



An artist's early rendering of how *The Confluence* could open to the rivers

## Public and Institutional Buildings

Public and semi-public buildings are an opportunity to express community pride, local cultural and social heritage or a sense of collective mission. Whether it is the City Hall or a water pumping station, public buildings should be designed with the knowledge that they will convey an important message to residents and visitors. Therefore, the design should express pride in civic life and accomplishment through architecture forms, materials, and siting. Public agencies should resist the temptation to cut corners on these features for the sake of current budgets as they leave a long-lasting impression.

The most important public building in Eau Claire is the City Hall, but it has reduced its original grandeur (inside and out) through inappropriate renovation and expansion. The federal court house, on the other hand, retains its beauty.

Park structures are another way to express civic themes. Eau Claire has recently installed several recreation buildings and picnic shelters that share a design theme, which is a beneficial approach. Parks can also be designed as a center point for a neighborhood, such as University Park was, as well as having less-ornamental functions. The Carson Park Baseball Stadium is a splendid marriage of symbolic design, function and social significance.

Schools, like parks, have symbolic power. Their design can express the importance that the community places on education and the welfare of its children.

Images of these and other public buildings are shown in the Community Facilities chapter of this Assessment.

## Particular Lovable Features

Certain features found here and there in a city strike an emotional chord. Nearly every town has them, and each person has a personal list in the back of their head. They seem to be found most often in older locations and places that are not dominated by autos.

These structures, spaces, times or events make a city lovable and bind us to that place. Without them, a place has no soul. With them, a place can be magical.

Here are a few of ours. You may have others of your own.



The natural beauty of both river valleys



Tree-lined streets





The farmers' market on a Saturday morning



Colors and textures in Phoenix Park



The S Bridge and Banbury Place.  
All four of the ped-bike bridges with a fifth to come.



The West Grand Avenue commercial block



Nicely maintained old houses



Hillside stairs

## Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances and Design Guidelines

The city exercises major control over the appearance of private development through its zoning and subdivision ordinances.

- **Zoning Ordinance:** The Zoning Ordinance, Chapter 18 of the City Code, regulates features such as the allowable use of each parcel of land, the minimum size of lots, minimum building and parking setbacks from property lines, the minimum lot size (in effect, the maximum density), the maximum building height, the minimum number of parking spaces, and the landscaping of new commercial properties, among other things.
- **Subdivision Ordinance:** The Subdivision Ordinance, Chapter 17 of the City Code, regulates the process of dividing land and prescribes the standards for the design of public improvements, such as street widths, in new multi-lot subdivisions.

### Zoning Ordinance

Overall, the zoning ordinance is a very standard set of regulations, in that it emphasizes the separation of different types of land use, especially housing from all other types of development. Close relationships of different land uses may be accomplished through the Planned Development District.

The zoning ordinance probably goes too far in its separation of land uses. For instance, allowing duplexes in single-family housing districts under certain conditions would reduce the concentrations of duplexes and make neighborhoods more interesting. Or, limited retail or office uses along major streets in what otherwise would be a single-family district would also help. Many Midwestern cities have good examples of successfully mixing land use through zoning.

Many residential or commercial developments are processed under the Planned Development feature of the ordinance, which allows some negotiation on the density and dimensions but also gives the City more control. The Planned Development feature includes many standards and requirements that would improve the appearance and function of the city if made part of the standard residential or commercial districts.

Section 18.45 presents requirements for the site design of all new development except single-family housing. These include site coverage, building placement, access, interior circulation, lighting, landscaping and trash handling. The interpretation and application of these requirements has significant effect on the city's appearance. Although this section has been amended since the 1993 comprehensive plan, there is still much room for improvement.

In 1998, the City prepared the Multi-Family Housing Design Manual, which is mostly advisory, not mandatory. However, the Planning Commission has been compelling developers to follow those guidelines when they apply for site plan approval. This has resulted in many design improvements compared to previous years. However, the City should strongly consider the content of the Design Manual and then incorporating those ideas into the zoning ordinance as requirements.

A Traditional Neighborhood Development District was added in 2002 to fulfill a state requirement. That district allows features such as alleys, shorter front setbacks, close proximity of residential and commercial land uses, secondary housing units on a parcel, narrower streets, and architectural guidelines.

The ordinance is unnecessarily difficult to read and understand because of its page formatting.

### **Subdivision Ordinance**

The most apparent urban design result of the Subdivision Ordinance is the requirement for the width of local (minor) residential streets. Section 17.12 requires that such streets be 30 feet wide (measured to the back of the curb), and that the public land (or right-of-way) be 60 feet wide. The City Council may allow narrower local residential streets under certain conditions such as very low forecast traffic or environmental constraints. The 60-foot right-of-way width for local residential street allows sufficient space for a row of trees and a sidewalk.

Current city policy and Subdivision Code Section 17.12.280 requires every new street to have a five-foot wide sidewalk on both sides, subject to City Council review. This ordinance dates back to 1974, but there has been inconsistent implementation of the sidewalk ordinance by changing City Councils. The result has been a mixture of streets with sidewalks on both sides, one side, or no sidewalks on either side. This has produced gaps in the pedestrian system. Consistent and full application of the sidewalk policy should be the norm.



Walking is enabled by an interconnected, city-wide network of sidewalk and paths.

Alleys are not allowed in residential areas unless necessary because of topography of other exceptional circumstances or in the Traditional Neighborhood Development zoning district.